WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Copenhagen
Denmark
6-12 March 1995

Attacking Poverty

Building Solidarity

Creating Jobs

UNITED NATIONS

Rural Poverty: The Struggle to Survive

Situation

Although some parts of the world have made great strides in development during the second half of the twentieth century, according to a report by the Secretary-General (A/CONF. 166/PC/6), "poverty and inequality remain and appear to be worsening". Moreover, the draft Declaration and Programme of Action (A/CONF.166/PC/L.22) for the upcoming World Summit for Social Development reveals that:

- More than 1 billion people live in abject poverty; more than half of those go hungry every day. A large proportion of men and women, particularly in Africa and the least developed countries, have very limited or no access to income and resources.
- Over 120 million people worldwide are without employment; many more are underemployed or have no viable sustainable livelihoods.
- Far too many people, particularly women, increasingly face vulnerability, isolation, marginalization, violence and insecurity about the future—their own and their children's—as poverty, joblessness and social disintegration become ever more ubiquitous features of today's world.

Especially since the "lost decade" of the 1980s, the numbers of rural poor have been increasing steadily, and they now encompass about one fifth of the entire global population. The figures portray a bleak picture:

- In 1988, it was estimated that the percentage of the rural population living below the poverty line was 61 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 60 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 31 per cent in Asia and 26 per cent in North Africa and the Near East.
- Some 55 per cent of those living below the poverty line are women; over the past two decades, their numbers have grown by 50 per cent, compared to 30 per cent for men.
- With mounting populations, landholdings in all regions of the developing world except Latin America and the Caribbean are becoming smaller and more fragmented; rural landlessness or near landlessness is on the rise, affecting at least 40 per cent of households in South Asia.

Poverty and the struggle to survive have undermined the vital natural resource base of the rural population. For example, just within the brief timespan of the past thirty years:

- Nearly 20 per cent of the topsoil from croplands has been lost, largely due to lack of capital and technology to undertake appropriate soil conservation measures;
- Millions of hectares have become wasteland due to poorly constructed and ill-maintained irrigation systems;
- Deforestation of tropical forests and woodlands has occurred at the rate of 11 million hectares a year, in a desperate attempt to clear land or to obtain fuelwood.

As rural conditions deteriorate, more and more rural people flock to urban centres. Most of these are men, leaving women behind to manage the homestead and the family.

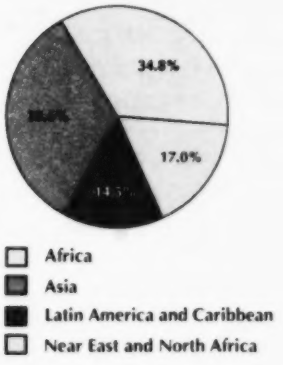
Issues

Considering the abundance and affluence in some parts of the world, the central question is: how can the rural poor obtain the resources they need to become more productive? Their requirements are relatively modest; the rural poor need:

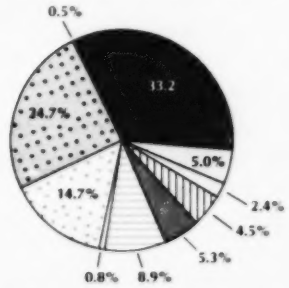
- Land or off-farm opportunities for employment;
- Technical support (extension services and adaptive research);
- Agricultural inputs: seeds, fertilizers, etc.;
- Credit for investment;
- Access to markets; and
- Community services: schooling, health care, sanitation and transport.

Women are a crucial factor in alleviating rural poverty. In order to successfully harness rural women's productive potential, specific

IFAD lending by region under the Regular and Special Programmes for Africa, 1978-1994
Total lending $4.2 billion



IFAD projects by type under the Regular and Special Programmes for Africa, 1978-1994
Total number of projects: 380



Source: IFAD

attention must be paid to their particular interests and needs. Women must be full and active partners in the development process.

When necessary, indigenous peoples must also be helped to adopt more appropriate technologies without undermining social cohesion and values.

Responses

In 1974, the Fourth World Food Conference, alarmed by a rising tide of rural poverty and hunger, created a specialized United Nations agency whose sole mandate was that of rural poverty alleviation. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) began operations in 1978.

Since 1978, IFAD has mobilized some $14 billion in support of initiatives to assist the poorest of the rural poor to produce more food, earn more income and improve the quality of their lives. About 29 per cent of the total comes from the Fund's own resources, replenished by voluntary contributions of its 157 member States, with 32 per cent coming from outside donors and 39 per cent provided by the Governments of recipient countries.

The design and financing of agricultural and rural development projects is IFAD's major activity. It also finances adaptive research and local institution-building directly related to the rural poor. IFAD also initiates country, regional and international dialogues that focus on the issue of rural poverty.

To date, the Fund has provided loans for 386 projects in 102 countries, 65 per cent of them on highly concessional terms. These projects are tailored to meet the needs of a particular target group. Some focus on agricultural development through such components as the provision of inputs, improved irrigation schemes and strengthened extension services. Others focus on livestock or fisheries development, or on providing credit to the poor.

A number of projects involve soil and water conservation, a high-priority objective of the Special Programme for sub-Saharan Countries Affected by Drought and Desertification (SPA), launched in 1986 and designed specifically to assist smallholders.

Direct Benefits to the Rural Poor

Small-scale: With the objective of directly benefiting intended target groups, priority has shifted gradually from larger, less targeted projects to the development of smaller, but more cost-effective, irrigation schemes.

Women: With an intentional focus on the gender of recipients, at least 30 per cent of IFAD's funding will be directed towards providing women the resources and support they need to realize their productive potential.

Credit: Innovative approaches to credit delivery have also been tested and proved successful through the formation of small groups acting as guarantors for their members' loans. Often teams are formed to bring credit services directly to the villages, instead of the villagers having to travel to the bank. There are also arrangements for in-kind credit and repayment, and, increasingly, credit is provided for off-farm enterprises.

Grants: By the end of 1993, IFAD had provided a total of $191.7 million to cover 481 grants for adaptive research and institution building. The former have focused on improved varieties of staple food crops, small farming systems and low-cost soil and water conservation measures, while the latter have concentrated on strengthening extension services, input delivery, credit facilities and NGO support in rural areas.

Future Priorities: Dialogue and Collaboration

Repeated initiatives have been taken to bring the issues of rural poverty to the attention of the international community. To this end, a series of national and regional seminars and workshops have brought together experts to share views and formulate action plans.

IFAD's collaboration with NGOs in the field has received added impetus by the creation in 1987 of the IFAD/NGO Extended Cooperation Programme. By the end of 1992, some 74 NGOs had participated in 59 IFAD projects, 64 per cent of them from sub-Saharan Africa, 16 per cent from Asia, 15 per cent from Latin America and the Caribbean and 5 per cent from the near East and North Africa.

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IFAD is explicitly mandated to assist the *rural* poor. Thus, three criteria have been constant in all IFAD projects and programmes to date:

- Identification of the concrete obstacles faced by the poor producer;
- Targeted delivery of relevant assistance; and
- Assistance in the development of an appropriate organizational framework.

These components have worked well on the micro level. The challenge now is for all donor institutions working in a coordinated way to build them into the overall structure of national policy and international development assistance.

This approach involves more active dialogue with Governments about the consequences of their policies. It also means a more searching scrutiny among donors themselves on the concrete relations between their macroeconomic growth prescriptions and the simultaneous reduction of poverty.

In addition, there must be greater coordination and co-financing of projects and programmes, broad sectoral frameworks specifically designed for complementary projects and programmes targeted specifically towards the poor.

The Social Summit: The opportunity provided by the convening of the World Summit for Social Development, from 6 to 12 March 1995 in Copenhagen, Denmark, should be seen as unique in the evolution of social development thinking.

The second commitment in the Summit's draft Declaration states: "We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as a moral, political and economic imperative of humankind."

Endorsement of this commitment, along with the other measures contained in the final Declaration and Programme of Action, will go a long way in bringing IFAD's work to fruition.

For further reading:

The Status of Rural Women in China, 1995, IFAD.
The State of World Rural Poverty, 1992, IFAD.
The State of World Rural Poverty: Profiles of Africa, the Near East and North Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, 1993, IFAD.
Food Security, IFAD.
Participatory Development, IFAD.

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Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
Printed on recycled paper by the United Nations Reproduction Section, New York
DPI/1588/SOC/CON—95-93084—January 1995—30M